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LABOR IN MEXICO

*By James Lord, Treasurer, Pan American Federation of
Labor; Member of Labor Commission to Visit
Mexico, 1918*

I have been asked to say a few words at this conference regarding the labor situation in Mexico. I will try to give you the benefit of a few facts as they occur to me regarding my experience with Mexican and other labor for many years, and especially in connection with my experience the last time I was in Mexico in the summer of 1918, when I had a good opportunity to study at close range the new labor movement there as it exists now.

Labor in Mexico is in bad shape. Ages of industrial serfdom, exploitation, internal fighting and revolution have kept the people fairly demoralized in that unhappy country. The Mexicans, strangely, like other people are creatures of environment, and when in any locality the opportunity occurs through better environment or a greater measure of real liberty, a distinct improvement is manifest, and by the same token bad economic and social conditions find their reflex there, just as they do in other countries.

The present labor movement in Mexico was conceived in the throes of the revolution against President Porfirio Diaz. Prior to that time they had no opportunity of openly meeting in any way, or even discussing the wrongs they endured. The peon, under the Diaz régime, was always to be a peon. This was the *status quo* question all over again. When the revolution burst forth, the workers seized their opportunity and began to organize into local sindicatos. Later they united these local sindicatos into district organizations. They fought in the revolution as industrial units, or unions, and the officers of the Machinists' Union, or the Bricklayers' Union, or what-not, would be the officers of that particular unit of the army, in many cases. The leaders of

this movement in its inception—those who elected to lead the men—were men of education. In many cases they were men of culture, professors, theorists, men who had become radical by reading but who had learned nothing in the field of bitter experience, and this knowledge is necessary to one who would really understand the laboring man. Men with good intentions took charge of this movement, and it spread rapidly through Mexico. It was known as *La Casa Del Obrero Mundial*, or “House of the Workers of the World.” The Mexicans have a strong admiration for the French. They like to do things as they think the French would do them, and this was shown in the formation of their labor movement. This explains the origin and the peculiar form of that movement in its beginning. Time and experience are changing their methods and ideas. They are getting their feet on the ground. They have already had considerable experience with other movements, and it is the sentiment of the workers throughout Mexico at this time to form a strong, practical trade movement, a national federation, composed of national, self-governed unions of trades and industries. They are also developing leadership among the workers—leadership that I prophesy will be heard from and will be known in the industrial world with no discredit to their ability. They are going along, trying their best to build the movement into such a form that they may get the best results for themselves. They realize that other people who came from lower depths, even, than the Mexican worker, have worked out their industrial redemption. They feel that they are to have at least one trial in their own country. We can pass a more intelligent judgment upon them after they have been given a fair trial. They are going to get that trial, and they surely have my best wishes.

Some years ago, a group of plucky forward looking men from the different Pan-American countries, together with a few of us in this American labor movement, began to talk things over, began to try to deal with the situation as it existed. We began by meeting periodically. The thing developed until a sort of committee was automatically formed to deal with Pan-American labor affairs. It grew so that

nearly all the time some representatives of Honduras, Argentina, the West Indies, or Mexico, were in Washington working away at the idea of a Pan-American Federation of Labor—a Pan-American International. They knew of the International of Europe—in fact, of the world—of which America is a part. The idea was to build another International to deal with the labor situation in the Western Hemisphere. Out of these efforts carried on by a few men grew the Pan-American Federation of Labor; and at the Laredo conference, in November, 1918, the organization was finally launched forth. Its first international meeting was a very good conference, the proceedings of which are well worth the time of any man or woman to read. It was a good beginning, but we expect to improve on the ideas that came before that Pan-American conference as time goes by.

Our first attempts were to set up an institution that would make for better fraternal relations between the workers of the different Pan-American countries—Make for better conditions for workmen emigrating from one country to another, set up a central bureau of information regarding the general economic conditions in these countries, and so on. We feel that we have been able, to a large extent, to prevent bloodshed on at least two occasions by the intelligent use of knowledge in our possession and the feeling that would be engendered in the workers of the different countries and the intelligent use of the prestige that we had attained through our comparatively small efforts. There is a great deal of work for the Pan-American Federation of Labor to do. There is a desire being manifested by the units composing it to “hew to the line” and do that work, and as time went on, it was decided that a committee from the American labor movement should go through Mexico, at least. There were certain things that needed to be attended to—certain things that needed doing. So, in the summer of 1918, John Murray, a Union printer, a man who was very familiar with the affairs of Mexico, one who has gone over the “divide” since that time, to the distinct loss of the workers of all the Pan-American countries, Santiago Iglesias, a native Spaniard, and your humble servant, were selected to undertake

this mission. I am going to tell you of just a few of our experiences that will give you an idea of the existing situation better than any other method that I can think of just now.

We went in by way of Laredo. We stopped at Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila, for a considerable time. We found that the National Federation of Labor for Mexico had already been formed four or five days before our arrival. We knew there was considerable sentiment for this thing being done, but we had no idea that it would be done so quickly. We found that the governor of that state had taken it upon himself to send out an official call to all the labor centers in the country of Mexico, requesting them to assemble at Saltillo, or in the State of Coahuila, for the purpose of using their best endeavors to form a suitable solidified national federation. He made no attempt to fasten himself on the movement or to interfere with it in any way. He simply sent out the call, addressed the delegation, and gave a little wholesome advice, and said: "It is yours, go ahead."

We went to the places in Mexico where we could get in touch with the people who could give us information of the actual existing situation. We met President Carranza and the cabinet officers, and we talked the situation over very plainly with them. We found some encouraging sentiment, and we found some sentiment that was not very encouraging, in official circles. The Mexican who was holding office at that time would make the admission very soon after beginning conversation with you that he was a State Socialist and believed in State Socialism. In discussing with them what they really did believe, or how they construed State Socialism, one got something of a shock. They did not believe that labor unions were particularly needed. They did not think that workers ought to take it upon themselves to establish international relations. They thought the government should control not only the industries, but the actions of the individuals in their country. They would take care of their labor conditions, the matter of wages, and the general welfare of workmen. They would take care of the international relations, also. There would not be any more strikes. It was not good for the workers to have

strikes. They were State Socialists! That was a new definition of State Socialism to me. We found that many of these gentlemen had that idea and were using it in that way. We found that every bit of real opposition we encountered from the time we crossed the border until we got back came from those men who were handling the campaign of German propaganda. There was not anything else that appeared in it—those men and their tools and hirelings.

After having some meetings and after having one big, central meeting in Mexico City, it was decided that I should address a last meeting to be held in a large labor hall in that city. The papers came out—*El Democrata*, *Nationalista*—not pro-German, but German—absolutely German owned and sold as the German press. These papers had never been friendly to the workers' cause, but the reverse. They suddenly became ultra-radical. An article appeared in the editorial columns and on the front pages of a syndicalist, or anarchist nature, every morning and every evening, written by a man who knew how to write that kind of stuff—I have had some experience reading it! He was no ordinary man that wrote those editorials. They were warning the workers of Mexico against these *gringoes*, these tools. They were telling them that their only hope was to stay in the syndicalist camp. The only hope of the workers was to fight any attempt of the American labor movement to ensnare them. They were not advocating national ownership or public ownership, but they claimed that the industrial group could take that industry and determine in their wisdom what to do with that industry. They were getting out these articles all the time. They were running editorials saying that these *gringoes*, who should not be allowed to remain in Mexico another minute, were here to get Mexico into this war, to fight her good friend, Germany, alongside of the thief and the murderer, the United States, the "Colossus of the North." We got copies of all these papers and kept them. They make very interesting reading. No matter what we said at these meetings, they simply distorted them to suit themselves. Unfortunately for them, in this case, as well as in many other cases, these people showed

that they were hardly as intelligent as they were industrious. They overdid the thing to such an extent that the situation reacted in our favor. In the first mass meeting that I attended and addressed, they had a fine, choice collection of American wobblers—I. W. W.'s—who had slipped away from the United States to get away from the draft. The Pan-American countries are infested with these people today. They are anywhere where they can stir up trouble and inflame people's minds, just as buzzards gather around the carcass of a dead horse. Mexico City is a Mecca for them. They came into these meetings. They raised their objections. They tried to stir up insurrection in the audience. In every case I had a man who could point them out, and when they came in, I challenged them to come up on to the platform and ask their questions out in the open and say what they had to say, with the alternative of going out of the meeting. I put it up to them, and so did the other speakers. They would not face the music. They wanted to stir up a row and get the situation beyond control, and then their work would be done. They kept this up continually. We were gradually getting the workers to understand this campaign. We did not tell them to do as we had done; we told them plainly that our movement was not perfect, that we had made many mistakes, and that we expected to make many more. It was the movement that the workers of North America had made, and it would always be made to conform to the highest average intelligence and desires of the workers. It would be changed just as they wanted to change it. We told them that each country participating in the Pan-American Federation would have to build its own movement in its own way, according to its own light; but we could all learn by meeting on common ground and exchanging our views and experiences and possibly we could learn also by one another's mistakes. Nevertheless, the papers were warning the workers to stay out. We were trying to ensnare them. Stories were printed in *El Democrata* and *Nacionalista* and *Universal* about the stealing of Texas and Arizona and California, of outrages committed daily on innocent women and children of the

border states. The story of almost every atrocity happening at that time on the Western front was taken almost literally, the names changed, and the thing made to apply to the "Colossus of the North!" I will simply say that for a few weeks down there it was not one of the kind of times when you got the blues because you had nothing to do or nothing to think about.

Now for the illiterates, for that great army, the beggar class, whose future no living man can forecast. Two halls, or *pulque* joints, were kept open in violation of the law. Third-rate whiskey is mild by the side of "pulky" and what it will do to you. One was called Hindenburg, and the other, U-Boat 38. They showed pictures of those atrocities in there. They told stories of these atrocities—what was going on in Coahuila, and Sonora, and Chihuahua. Nevertheless, while the sentiment dominating Mexico City at the time we were there was pro-German, the sentiment was created by those in control at that time, and the sentiment amongst the illiterates was surely pro-German because of the stuff they got in the Hindenburg and in U-Boat 38. The thinking class—the thinking class among the workers and in the business circles were *pro-Ally*. I made up my mind at that time, and I have never changed it, that Carranza was hopelessly pro-German. I say that because I saw what was going on every day. I know the stories I heard, but I am not going by the stories: I am going on what I saw, and I can believe that. The report was that Pablo Gonzales was pro-Ally. He was a sort of Secretary of War with the army taken away from him. He had no army. You could spot the officer—the military officer—who was taking the money. Any man or woman here could pick him out. They trained their mustaches to grow straight up. They tried even to do a little of the goose step when they were walking, shamelessly, brazenly, letting people know what they were at. The sentiment in Mexico City was that the Western front could not stand up. When the Germans went through to the Channel ports, the Mexicans believed that it was only a matter of time before the defense on the Western front would break utterly, and when that world

domination came, the young fellow who was a trained militarist would not be the worst off in that kind of a combination. That applied individually and nationally. All these things entered into our efforts to make clear to the workers there what the Pan-American was for.

Now, regarding conditions in Mexico, as to whether a part of the people are fit to rule, or not. We have had the universal ballot in this country, and I will say that unless that eighty per cent of the Mexican people used the ballot more intelligently than we do here, there would be no danger of the intelligent twenty per cent minority being submerged! Man is a creature of environment. If an American worker or a British worker had to go to his work continually on a diet of *frijoles* and *tortillas*, if there is any power on earth could make him do that, I do not know that his efficiency or his productivity would be as great, even, as that of the Mexican laborer. He might possibly stand a whole lot more than he stands. I have lived on that fare for a little while, but not more than a minute longer than I could help! Man is a creature of environment. Is it right, is it intelligent, to forever condemn the peon, who never got enough wages to enable him to get anything better than red beans and flapjacks, which do not produce enough strength for the work he is expected to do? For the amount of work he is able to do, he cannot earn any more, and therefore he cannot do any more, for he cannot obtain the necessary food on which to work. What chance has he? Somebody else has been unfit to govern, I should think, for they have evidently failed in their mission. The Mexican worker, as I understand him, is sick and tired of revolutions. He is sick and tired of the whole game. I do not know whether he ever would be any better than he is, for he has never had any chance to be any better. Give them better environments; give them something to eat; give them other conditions under which to live besides this state of constant revolution. Give them a living wage, and then pass judgment on them after they have had a reasonable chance to try to make better men of themselves. It may be, of course, that the Mexican has lost his mental stamina. People

talk about this proposition lightly. Perhaps if a man would live on a diet of *frijoles* and *tortillas* for twelve months and work in the mines on that kind of fare, he might be better able to pass judgment on these people. Let him put himself in the peon's place for once. And I respectfully recommend to the directors of industry in Mexico, whether British, American, or native, that they try out a system of joint relations with their workers, that they recognize at last the human equation in this thing, that they give them a living wage, that they build them better homes, that they teach them hygiene and cleanliness, that they teach them some things worth while—teach them some things besides hatred. A slave may have feared his master, but he never respected him. If a chain is fastened to a slave, the other end of the chain is fastened to his master. I have always revolted against this caste idea since I was able to understand what it was. That old prayer, "God bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more," will not save poor Mexico. The man who helps Mexico will have to help her in the spirit of a broader vision than that. The way to help Mexico, in my opinion, is to help without trespassing, to give them an opportunity to save themselves, and we will then see what they will do.

I remember, a few years ago, I was attending a meeting of the American Federation of Labor at San Francisco. There is a field down in southeastern Arizona known as the Clifton, Morenci Metcalf field, a field almost unknown to us at that time. I have been a miner since I was eleven years old, and I have been pretty much over the mining fields of the world. I have had some practical experience. This field was, however, unknown to me. I had never been in it. It is practically in old Mexico. Ninety per cent of the people there speak Spanish. There are a few Spaniards there, but the great majority of the people are Mexicans. They had gone on a strike in that field. They did not belong to any organization. They had simply got to the jumping-off place—to the place it is dangerous to let any group of workmen arrive at—to the place where they felt that they had *nothing to lose*. They all went out on strike.

There was not a speck of smoke in that field, from a miner to a smelter. Strangely enough, in that particular instance the sheriff was not against the strike, and it is the one lone case in the hard rock mining states that I know of. Strangely enough, in that particular case the governor of the state was not against it; and strangely enough, in that particular case the militia was not used to kill the strikers. The militia went in and kept the peace. The gunmen, the same group of which a few are dining in Paradise since a few days ago in West Virginia, were in there. Some of the best informed men went to them and said: "We do not want trouble with you; we have not done anything to you. Don't let the sun go down on you. If you come back the second time, we shall not be so polite to you as we are now." The gunmen went out; and that is the only strike I know of in the West where the peace was kept and not a dollar's worth of property was lost. Imagine my feelings. I was there merely to look it over and see if I could be of assistance to them or give them any advice. I found everything so different from anything I had ever experienced. Dick Franz was the groceryman there, and all his neighbors and customers were Mexicans. He extended them credit on beans and flour—the same old fare, for strike fare was the same fare that they got when they were working. He extended them credit to the extent of \$34,000, and was ready to fold up his tent and steal away when I got there. He had ruined his own credits. He had no regrets; he kept saying, "We got them licked, if only the beans had held out." In that situation, I sat down and wired every fellow in the labor movement I knew who would get a move on him, and donations began to come in. We got enough money to pay for a carload of beans, gave the money to Franz, who got the beans and re-established his credit all along the line. By this time the Department of Labor was interested and came into the situation, and one of the best men in that service happened to go out there—a man who was a thorough miner, hard rock and coal, and who knows the game. Through his efforts a stockholders' meeting was held in El Paso, and the stockholders all came from Scot-

land. It was their first time in this country. They were a set of very fine gentlemen. They had no idea of the corruption and the graft that had been practiced on these miners. As fast as cases were proven at the hearings, and as boss or sub-boss, or anyone else was proven guilty of graft or anything irregular, his head was cut off officially, and he was told to go. They carefully considered all the demands of the miners, and on their own statement, which is in writing, they admitted that the demands were not unreasonable and that they would meet them at once. The settlement finally hinged on what wages the miners were to get. They got the eight-hour day, better homes, better conditions underground, and the promise of things such as ventilation that meant a great deal to them. They could not agree on the wage. The men, in their first strike, and with victory apparently within their grasp, wanted to establish the standard wage in the copper mines of the Rocky Mountains. In this particular case the ore was not very rich; it is what they call low grade ore. In this case the production of ore per man was just a fraction more than half the production from any of the other camps. I knew the reason. You had only to look at the men to know why they did not produce more. They had not it in them to do it. But they wanted that wage. We told them it was a physical impossibility to do it, commercially. We said to them, "You will put this field out of business, and then you will all be through. You will get a good, substantial advance in wages. We advise you to take it. You can live better; you can get better food; you are going to have a lot better working conditions. Now try to raise the production and show that there is some benefit in these improvements; and whenever you do, they will go into conference with you again and discuss the question with you again." They went back to work, and by degrees the production per man was brought up until it was on par with the other mining fields. The miners lived better, had better homes, and did better in every way, and in six weeks—possibly two months—from the day they returned to work, Dick Franz was paid his \$34,000 by those Mexicans. There

is an instance that shows what can be done by the Mexicans when they are given something to eat and a chance to show what they can do.

I could cite many other incidents that have occurred in these United States with Mexican workmen where the same thing has taken place. In the mining camps in Colorado, New Mexico, and other states where the Mexican miner owns his home, has a small automobile, in some cases, he has proved that he is as good a miner as there is in the camp. Talk about going down to them—you can go down to them and bring them up to your own level; you don't have to stay down there with them. These things have been done before, and they can be done again; and until the Mexican worker is treated in that kind of a spirit, until some intelligence is manifested in connection with this problem, there will be no peace in Mexico.

I went through the coal fields and the hard rock mining fields in Mexico in 1918, and today the wage is a peso and a quarter a day—a dollar and a quarter (Mexican money) and the cost of living is higher there than it is here. How do they do it? How can they give their children enough to eat? How can they do their work? How can they raise decent children? How would you like to have such conditions exist in the United States? If men's environments are improved, they will become better and more tolerant men. There will be better little boys and girls, and they will become better men and women. Somebody is to blame besides the peon. I am not afraid to go down to him. I have been there often, and I have brought him up, too. I am not afraid of that 80 per cent, and I am not their judge, either. I have not been that good in my life that I can pass judgment on that 80 per cent. I have done many things in my life that have been wrong, but I have always tried to play the game squarely with my fellow worker. Well, a peso and a quarter is the wage down there. In the bituminous fields it is a little better, for it is mostly piecework, and they might make a dollar and a half or two dollars and a half. The only organizations that are national in character are those of the coal miner, the textile worker and the rail-

road worker. The "land of promise" for the Mexicans did not materialize under Carranza, by any means, and it never could. He was a disappointment to the workers; there is no question about that. I was in Mexico City one time when they forbade the street railway workers from holding a peaceable parade, and they were 100 per cent organized there at that time. They were told what would happen to them if they held it. I was in position to hear of these things, being in different parts of Mexico from time to time.

Regarding the new régime, it is superfluous for me to say that I do not know what will happen. Nobody can be a prophet regarding conditions in Mexico with any safety. I know the men in charge, and I would stake my future on the judgment and good intention of at least some of them. Certainly, it is true that they helped to put Carranza in power, and they were disappointed in him, for he did not make good. Many of us, with our splendid enlightenment and qualifications, might have been loud in our praise for Woodrow Wilson a little while ago and now be disappointed in him. That is human nature, and it does not belong alone to Mexico. You have got to give people a chance to save themselves. You cannot hand democracy down to anybody; it cannot be done. You must give them a chance to achieve democracy, and that is the only way it will exist in this world. The labor movement is what the workers make it. The syndicalist movement, as it appears in Latin-American countries, is the natural expression that comes after ages of repression and is the natural vent to the theories and ideals of the entire Latin race. We do not tell them what to do. We tell them our own experiences, and they are trying to make their own movement conform to ours. My judgment is that they will have a strong, virile movement in Mexico; and that in the other countries the labor movement will follow pretty much as the Mexican movement goes. Whether they succeed or not, there must be the opportunity afforded them to become real human beings, with the right to live as human beings should live, and until such conditions develop there will never be satisfaction or internal peace in Mexico. I am going to help

them all I can. My best wishes go with Obregon. I believe he will be the next president of Mexico. I said that a year ago. I personally hope he will be the one chosen. I believe he is big enough to do the things that must be done. I believe he can convince the people that the constitution of Mexico wants changing, that some of their idealism should be set aside, and that they should do the very necessary work that needs doing. As the constitution was drafted, where the Government owned everything below the surface of the ground and all other things, it would be very nice and it would not be very hard to manage or to carry it into effect, provided they could lick America and Great Britain and a few other countries; otherwise, the constitution is unworkable. Carranza knew very well that it was unworkable. I believe that these men know it and have said so, to the extent that they can change anything of that character to conform to intelligent, sensible progress. The Mexican worker is beginning to realize that he has unnecessarily wasted a lot of time shouting, "salute the revolution sociale" and "capital is internationale," and he is beginning to feel that the only thing that is international is labor, and that if it is intelligently organized, the worker has nothing to fear, no matter from what country capital comes. He is organized to the place where he can take care of his own affairs, and in this way he will take care of himself in a better way than he will by simply showing and demonstrating that he has a ton of philosophy and an ounce of real, intelligent fight—and that is the way the Mexican worker has been sized up, up to date. Let us not pass judgment upon him because he has suddenly acquired revolutionary ideas. Think of the environment. Think of his surroundings. Let us be glad that we have not had to endure the things that have been forced upon him. When we talk of social status, I may say that my own ancestors occupied a lower social status than the Mexican now occupies, and this not so long ago either. Think of the environment of the miners in Great Britain. It was not so long ago that the records showed that children were born in the mines. I have seen the record showing that one mine

manager traded a pony for a man with a neighboring mine owner. My grandmother worked in a coal mine in Britain when she was a very small child. My father was in the mines at the age of six. My mother worked in a woolen mill at seven years of age. They are both living in this country now, and they are intelligent people. I know something about this low status, for they came from it, and the British workers have come from a pretty low status in a comparatively short time; and I will convince every man and woman I can, at every opportunity that comes to me, that the thing to do is to throw their sheltering arms around these unfortunate neighbors of ours, and let us all try to see if we cannot make better progress; we will see if there cannot be industrial peace and progress achieved in this life. We will go on and do our best and see that the *frijoles* and *tortillas* standard of fare disappear forever from this world, that the word "caste" shall have gone the way of the oxcart, and that the sunlight of industrial liberty shall shine over all the children of men.